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A QUEEN UNCROWNED

—OR—
THE STORY IN THE LONE INN.

CHAPTER XXIV.

If so, it must be a very bird's-eye view, and very swiftly taken.

Look, then! One year has passed since the last act. And now the time is night; the scene, Disbrow Park. It is more like a glimpse of fairyland than ever, this lovely night; for the whole stately mansion is one vast sheet of light. The beautiful fountains are sending vast jets of silver sparkling up in the serene moonlight and the trees are bright with the many colored lamps, that twinkle like myriads of fireflies, and give the whole scene an air of enchantment. The laurel walk is one blaze of illumination, and sweet delicious strains of music rise, and fall, and float on the still night air. Carriage after carriage rolls up the broad avenue, and throngs of magnificently-dressed ladies and stately gentlemen pass into the marble hall. Lady Earncliffe has just returned from the "land of the free and the home of the brave;" has been presented at court; made a decided sensation; and to-night gives her first ball.

See her there in white velvet, frosted with seed-pearls, sparkling with jewels, and floating in filmy point-lace—the most bewitching, the most dazzling countess in the peerage—receiving her guests. And yet she is our own Jacquetta, after all—the same sparkling little fairy as of yore. The short, dancing curls are of the old obnoxious hue; but a coronet becomes them wonderfully. The wicked gray eyes sparkle still with the old mocking light that was wont to madden a certain Captain Disbrow, and the little rosebud mouth is wreathed with the same entrancing smile that once drove the dashing guardsman to the verge of despair. And there she stands, as bright and self-possessed, receiving her titled guests in her husband's superb drawing-rooms, as when she stood, cool and defiant, before him, that morning when he met her first at old Fontelle.



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THE IMPRISONED HEIRESS

THE SPECTRE OF EGREMONT

CHAPTER I.

"Then why should you hope that something would occur to free me from the compact?"

Her ladyship colored and looked confused.

In truth, she was most anxious that the compact between the fathers of these young people should be carried into effect, but she had affected an opposition in order to awaken the interest of Alexina in her betrothed. The heiress was exceedingly self-willed, and the countess had some wild fears that she might choose to discard Lord Ashcroft and abide the consequences.

The ruse succeeded, for Alexina said, with bitterness:

"I understand, Lady Egremont. You wish me to remain single, fearing that you may lose something by my marriage. You will not be satisfied, allow me to assure you."

On returning to the mansion the ladies separated, the Lady Alexina retiring to her own suite of rooms, and Lady Egremont proceeding to the earl's "study"—a room that served principally for the use of cigars and meerschaums.

His lordship was engaged in his favorite occupation at the moment of her ladyship's entrance, but he immediately laid aside his pipe, placed a seat for her, and inquired:

"Well, Evelyn, you have explained everything to Alexina, have you not?"

"Yes; and she seems to regard Lord Ashcroft with much curiosity. If he should prove to be as handsome as report describes him, he will have no difficulty in winning Alexina's heart. I acted upon the ruse you suggested, Ewart, and her interest in Lord Ashcroft was immediately excited. She accused me of wishing to keep her single."

The earl smiled.

He was a portly man, with a fine, ruddy countenance, with hair and whiskers of an iron-gray hue. At first sight he seemed the impersonation of a "fine old English gentleman" but a close observer would have noticed his shifting, uneasy glances when long regarded, and a nervousness of manner that seemed strangely out of place in one of his apparent health.

"Let her think what she will of us so that she obeys her father's behest, and marries Lord Ashcroft. If she were to refuse him she would forfeit her entire fortune except a decent annuity," and Lord Ashcroft would inherit it. Ashcroft is to be her heir under any condition, as her husband, or as her rejected lover, or in case of her death before coming of age. In either of the two latter cases, you and I will be left totally unprovided for."

"Xina will never refuse Lord Ashcroft, Ewart, you may rest assured," declared Lady Egremont. "She has too much pride to see another woman mistress of Egremont in her stead. It would be a death-blow to her to turn her back upon this place and go to live in some humbler spot. We have kept her secluded, and her heart is quite free. If Ashcroft has sense he can win her consent to a marriage within the month."

A surprise awaited the earl and the countess later than day, when they learned that, without a moment's warning, Lady Alexina had peremptorily dismissed her governess and her music teacher. This information was communicated by the aggrieved parties themselves; and when they had withdrawn, leaving the Lady Alexina's guardians by themselves, they looked at each other sadly, and her ladyship gave vent to the thought that oppressed them both by saying:

"When we have served Alexina sufficiently for her purposes, will she not fling us aside as she has done these faithful friends of her youth? Have we not reared a being who will yet wring our hearts by her ingratitude, and leave us to struggle in comparative poverty, now that we have become completely enervated by years of luxury?"

The question remained for solution. (To be continued.)

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